

Xi orders new PLA units to be combat ready

President Xi Jinping asked People's Liberation Army commanders on Tuesday to focus on strengthening their unit's combat capability following the establishment of 84 large units.

Xi, also chairman of the Central Military Commission, met commanders of these new units at the commission's headquarters in Beijing.

The new units must prepare themselves for combat and study wars. They should concentrate on improving their joint operation capabilities and technology level, Xi said.

The president also told the new forces to conduct more combat exercises and give priority to building "new-type" fighting capabilities.

In PLA terminology, new-type fighting capabilities generally refers to capabilities of engaging in electronic, information and space operations.

All 84 of the new units are at combined corps level, which means their commanders have or soon will be promoted to a rank of either major general in the Ground Force, Air Force and Rocket Force or rear admiral in the Navy. Though the PLA has not disclosed how these units were set up, it is likely that they were created through the regrouping of existing forces rather than recruiting new personnel, because the Chinese military is still engaged in cutting its troops by 300,000.

The units' emergence also indicates the PLA's structural shake-up has taken effect. At a Central Military Commission conference in December, Xi ordered the military's structure to be adjusted and optimized, calling for a smaller but capable and flexible military.

The establishment of the units is the latest move in a massive reform the PLA is undergoing. That unprecedented reform began in November 2015, when the Central Military Commission unveiled a blueprint for the PLA's development. The commission pledged to establish a leaner and more efficient command chain, to reduce the number of noncombatant personnel and departments and to build the PLA into a mightier force capable of winning modern wars.

Since then, the PLA has set up a headquarters for its Ground Force, founded a Strategic Support Force dedicated to electronic, information and space operations, and established a Rocket Force to replace the former Second Artillery Corps.

The previous four top PLA departments—staff, politics, logistics and armaments—were dismantled.